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TRAP-ED IN THE CITY:
Action Research on the Impact of Emdin's *Reality Pedagogy* in the Urban Music Classroom
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

During their preparation, most pre-service music educators are asked to develop a “philosophy of music education” before they have their own classroom or students. The processes by which pre-service teachers develop these views vary—some informed mainly, or only, by their own K-12 music education, some informed by class discussion and readings in music education advocacy and philosophy.

Ideally, this process involves examining and developing beliefs regarding what musics to teach, and why; as well how to teach students music. Yet, prevailing professional practice makes one wonder if many teachers have engaged in this process. In the twenty-first century American classroom, we must continue to ask ourselves what musics should we teach, and how are they to be taught?

The question of what sort of music is appropriate for youth is as old as Plato and Socrates. Plato stated, “...musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful...” (p. 122). One of the original justifications for music education in American schools was to promote good citizenship and character. Yet, discerning what music, or way of teaching music, promotes such virtues, is amorphous and subjective.

Early American music education also sought to develop musical skills that were central to community life and civic duty. Music education entered American schools, in part because of the desire to develop the musicality of American church laity. Early instrumental ensembles in

American schools once looked very much like the popular dance bands of the day. The sorts of music found in public schools connected to people's everyday lived experiences outside of schools. Over time, this connection began to wane.

Concert and marching bands only began to enter public schools after World War I, a decade after they had begun to fade from the popular musical landscape (Mark, 1987). Jazz did not enter school curricula until the 1960s, fifteen years or more after it ceased being part of mainstream popular music. Today, in the twenty-first century, public school curricula still focus the overwhelming majority of instructional time and energy on Western classical music and jazz.

While these genres have a great deal of value, many music educators fail to make meaningful connections to the music children come to school already knowing and valuing. This is ethically problematic, and creates challenges for teacher and student. Additionally, the opportunity to participate in music ensembles is not always guaranteed in urban schools. Budget constraints often lead to the consolidation of elementary and middle grades into one building with one music teacher between all grades. Music teachers are then asked to provide enriching musical experiences through the means of general music instruction. This course title alone is daunting and begs the question, yet again, of *what* music and *how*?

With the country's merciless push to imbue children with twenty-first century skills, the National Association for Music Education reviewed and expanded the 1994 national standards to more closely resemble and align with the Common Core standards developed in 2009. However, what failed to happen was a cohesive development of curriculum, particularly for general music, that would easily support these rigorous standards. This is problematic when music teachers are then expected to assess their students based on the standards, the failure of which can impact their own evaluations. These two challenges—of content and pedagogy—matter for all students

but are particularly significant when teaching children whose personal culture is so diverse from the norms and expectations of their academic environments.

Problem Statement

Many music educators view diversity as a challenge, rather than an inevitable reality or even an advantage. Those who view diversity in this way see, usually unconsciously, their experience, perspectives, and values as the standard against which those who are different must be measured.

Kruse (2018) conceives of this differently, stating American schools do not have a diversity problem, but a homogeneity problem. While the national population in public schools is increasingly diverse, many individual schools are now more segregated than they were when *Brown vs. Board of Education* was decided (Strauss, 2013). NCES statistics show that, in 2013, 50% of children enrolled in public schools (including public charter schools) were white, 16% were black, and 25% were Hispanic. The projected 2025 statistics are 46%, 15%, and 29% respectively.

Yet, if we looked at the Hartford, Connecticut public schools as an example, we see that, in 2013-2014, 31.3% of their students were Black or African American and 49.9% were Hispanic or Latino with only 12.2% of the school population being white. In light of this reality, I will use Kruse's term of homogeneity rather than the more common term of diversity, since it better frames the problem.

Hartford was made acutely aware of its homogeneity problem in 1996, when the Connecticut Supreme Court's decision in *Sheff v. O'Neill* sought to address what they called the diversity issue. This case resulted in the Connecticut State Legislature passing *An Act Enhancing*

Educational Choices and Opportunities in 1997. This allowed parents to choose to send their children to schools outside of the district, as well as the development of magnet and regional charter schools. The intent was to create a genuinely diverse population in more public schools through voluntary means. Twenty years later, in 2016, the *Hartford Courant* ran a series examining the results of the *Sheff v. O'Neill* decision (Torre, 2017), and Connecticut NPR station WNPR aired a panel discussion on this issue (Torre, Kauffman, Lott, Goldstein, & Sheff, 2017). The *Courant* series concluded the decision to desegregate Hartford public schools through a “choice” program temporarily alleviated racial inequities but failed to successfully address systemic issues rooted in racism and marginalization of the poor. Connecticut sought to “enhance educational choices and opportunities” (Torre, 2017) through programs encouraging voluntary desegregation through magnet schools. Many of these new schools were successful, but the neighborhood public schools left behind in Hartford grew even less economically, racially, and ethnically diverse, and poorly funded.

The Sheff lawsuit demanded improvements in “access”, but, as Kruse (2018) has said, “Access to what?” Many schools, still, have yet to examine the question of content or pedagogy and its cultural relevance.

From its beginnings, mirroring and supporting the musical life of the day, music education has become almost entirely focused on teaching the appreciation and performance of European classical music, despite many calls for change, beginning with the Tanglewood Symposium in 1967. Despite these efforts, even the American invention of jazz that burst onto the landscape in the 1920s, becoming an extremely popular form of mass entertainment through the mid-1940s, did not enter the school music curriculum until the late 1960s—over two decades after it was no longer a popular part of most Americans’ daily experiences.

The many types of popular music in American youth culture today are treated, by most music educators, with either benign neglect or outright contempt. Not surprisingly, many students have come to view “school music” with the same feelings. A change in our practice is needed to ensure that twenty-first century American youth are given space at the table to exchange thoughts and ideas regarding the popular music culture that is a large part of their daily life.

Purpose of the Study

Since 2012, I have served as a music educator in the Hartford Public Schools. Trained in a very conventional undergraduate music education program, I quickly learned a shift in my personal paradigm was necessary to form a pedagogical approach that is child-centered and rooted in meaningful relationships. In the last seven years, I have realized developing young people’s authentic, personal voices must be a primary goal of my teaching. In order to accomplish this, my music classroom must not only include music that my students know and value. Creation, not re-creation or appreciation, must form an important part of my teaching practice. My music classroom should look and sound like my students, and like myself.

In the work of science-teacher educator Chris Emdin (2016), I discovered his concept of a cogenerative dialogue. Such a dialogue, or *cogen*, as he abbreviates it, is a group of students who meet regularly with the teacher to discuss their personal strengths, how best they believe their assets can be utilized in the classroom, and even how future lessons should proceed. I sought to apply Emdin’s concept, along with Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández’s concept of cultural production, to my classroom. Fernández has best described cultural production as “the active

engagement in reorganizing the symbolic content of our social being.” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2007).

I will discuss both these concepts, which form my theoretical framework, later. To date, only one music educator (Karvelis, 2017) has written about his application of Emdin’s work in his classroom. This action research study sought to apply Emdin’s and Gaztambide-Fernandez’s ideas in my classroom, over the course of a summer program and the fall 2018 semester, in terms of the following research questions:

1. How might I build a curriculum that utilizes cultural production through cogenerative dialogue?
2. What effect might this have on my students? On myself? What implications might it have for the music education profession?

Method

This is an action research study. Action research is a self-evaluative process that involves the continued analysis of one’s practice (Phillips 2010). It requires critical thinking that identifies personal paradigms, allowing space to shift those paradigms if necessary, and develop a personal, teacher identity. In this sense, the researcher is both subject and facilitator. The work evaluates intrinsic values and ideas and their extrinsic results.

Since this study involved action research in my own classroom while I carried out ordinary instructional activities, no IRB review was required.

My role as researcher was complex in this study, as I could not merely act as a detached observer. For the purposes of this study I was a facilitator and active participant. An action research approach to examining Emdin’s *cogens* and Gaztambide-Fernández’s *cultural*

production is appropriate, considering both concepts rely on the combined experiences of both teacher and student. My students and I served as subjects throughout this study.

Subjects for this study included the middle school students from my school who participated in the 2018 summer program, as well as students in my fall 2018 Modern Band and Honors Band classes. Students in the summer program were selected based on enrollment. I was not aware of what students would be in my summer class until I was given a physical roster. My tenure at my school has allowed me to develop long-term relationships with the children who were selected for this study, a vital process when working with urban students (Martignetti et al, 2013). I found this to be important when having discussions with several students and allowing them to provide candid responses to my questions. Data for the study included my own reflective log, student responses from online surveys, student writing, my observations of my students, and anecdotal evidence captured in video clips from school events. Much of the data is in students' own words.

It is important to make clear this is a study of my classroom with one set of students. In action research, as in other forms of qualitative work, the focus is on detailed exploration of a particular instance or experience, rather than broad examinations leading to broadly generalizable conclusions. I examine my own practice, with the hope of improving it. I also hope to inspire other teachers to engage in similar self-reflection and self-improvement. Such work is inherently local and contextual; while this study has implications for others' practice, it is not a prescription for a single way of effectively teaching African-American and Latix youth.

CHAPTER II

Relevant Literature

Urban and Cosmopolitanism

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández's article *Musicking in the City* calls into question the images that are subconsciously conjured when we personally define "urban". In the music classroom, these images can lead educators to focus on the narrow constructs created by these imagined definitions, and then to seek to manage behaviors defined as "urban". However, implementing critical and culturally productive approaches based in student *cosmopolitanism*, as defined by Gaztambide-Fernández and Emdin, would allow educators to examine and invite into the classroom the personal cultures of the children, families, and communities that comprise specific neighborhoods (read: "hood", "urban", "poor", etc.).

Associating the word "urban" with black and brown people who reside in crowded cityscapes is no accident. In the 1970's a New York radio DJ named Frankie Crocker attempted to boost ratings and solicit advertisers by promoting what he called "urban contemporary music". At WBLS, his radio broadcast became the foremost "Total Black Experience in Sound" (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). Urban music culture became synonymous with Black culture. What has resulted is the use of an oversimplified advertisement to define an entire group of people within all social spheres. This has had major implications in the arts and academia. The problem with this is:

...by mobilizing the term urban, in relationship to black music, the move at once masked while also underscoring the powerful link between 'urban' as a particular space inhabited by particular groups and 'urban' as a particular set of cultural -- in this case musical -- practices; while perhaps not all urban music was necessarily black, all contemporary black music was presumably urban. (Gaztambide-Fernández 2011, p. 16)

This crystallized definition resulted in decades of permeating stereotypes that validated the perpetuation of an education system rooted in the business of “civilizing”— a term which has a long history in American public education.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School of Pennsylvania was established in 1879. Its aim was to school indigenous children, taken from their tribal lands and families, in the accepted ways of European colonizers. Journals from the Carlisle teachers uncovered the genuine belief that they were charged with rescuing the children from their “savage ways”. This required a systematic and traumatizing stripping of native identity. Any defiance was met with severe discipline. Over 100 years later, this civilizing sentiment is echoed in the words of a music educator captured in an essay by Fiese and DeCarbo:

Since any background in music is woefully absent, any activity involving listening to, performing, or reading about music subjects seems to be effective. Most students particularly respond to performances by professional musicians brought into the school or going to an orchestra hall to hear professional performances. (Fiese & DeCarbo 1995, p.31)

This posits a major purpose of American music education is to expose *certain* children, viewed as uneducated, impoverished, or uncultured, to experiences that are determined to be valuable because they fall into the narrow schema of Western European musical culture. We know what that looks like, don’t we? Choir, orchestra, concert band, marching band. It sounds like G.F. Handel and Percy Grainger. The *Hallelujah Chorus* and *Lincolnshire Posy*. There is value in experiencing these works, whether as performer or audience member, but that value cannot be determined or justified merely by defining these experiences as “high art” or “something outside of daily experience”. On the other hand, why is it that many attempts to engage students of color in music are done through “ethnic” means? African drumming, gospel choirs, presentations on *bomba y plena*, or forming a mariachi band? We cannot choose seemingly diverse experiences

for children based on their perceived ancestry. And even if we are correct in our assumptions, we can still be completely wrong about children's personal culture. Music educators should not be the *only* individuals determining the value of these experiences at all. Students must also decide what is of value to them through critical pedagogy, claim that knowledge, and collaborate with peers and teachers to pursue this knowledge. This, as outlined by Fernandez, is the critical approach to music education:

The critical approach to music education seeks to interrupt normative and essentializing ways of thinking about culture, mainly by illuminating how power dynamics shape whether and how particular kinds of music come to be accepted as legitimate and/or authentic. (Fernandez 2011, p.31)

The possibility that critiquing music can become paramount, compared to the performing and experiencing of it, is not necessarily a detriment to the music classroom, particularly in secondary general music settings. If “education is life itself” as John Dewey says, then the critical approach to music education is essential for children who are otherwise disenfranchised and marginalized. When the content of this approach is taken and used to motivate students to create original material we see cultural production:

urban youth can consider how they wish to identify and self-represent. Cultural production is an opportunity to consider the complexity of the relationships and circumstances that surround students in urban schools and of their own implication in how these evolve and manifest. By placing cultural production at the center of educational experience in urban schools, we open the learning space for the possibility that students may rediscover themselves as social agents. (Fernández 2007, p. 35)

Emdin offers a redefinition that links the deep similarities between the children who were products of the Carlisle School and similar institutions and the children who attend modern, urban schools:

Identifying urban youth of color as neoindigenous allows us to understand the oppression these youth experience, the spaces they inhabit, and the ways these phenomena affect what happens in social settings like traditional classrooms. It seeks to position these

youth in a larger context of marginalization, displacement, and diaspora. (Emdin, 2016, p.9)

Why does this matter in the urban music classroom? These pedagogical approaches make space for young black and brown people to partake of the “classical” education that seeks to make “the soul graceful” (Plato) and engage in their communities, but on their terms. This means youth who have historically had no say in how they engage in their cultural education are now given deliberate access to tools that will help them determine the value in familiar and unfamiliar musical genres, concepts, and compositions. But before we engage the students at this level, we must come to understand, see, and accept them in their totality.

On Their Own Terms: Reclaiming “Rachet”

Urban dictionary.com currently defines “rachet” as:

An annoying, very rude person. Normally tries to act ghetto by typing in words or phrases such as ‘Af’, ‘janky’, ‘finna’, ‘cus’, etc. Most people think of ‘rachet’ girls or boys as trashy. In other words, a ‘rachet’ person is the most non-classy human-being in presence. They usually have the worst grammar problems and they always try to pick fights with everybody.

Emdin has turned this phrase on its head, much in the way Kruse has called to “flip the script” (2016). The call to be “rachetdemic” is Emdin’s plea to teachers and society to accept urban children in all their “non-classiness” and acknowledge their brilliance. Indeed, he suggests that urban children exhibit genius, resilience, and “rachetness” concurrently on a daily basis. His very ethos for the rachetdemic lifestyle is encapsulated in a powerful mantra found on his #HipHopEd website:

1. I will not hide my rachet self to make a broken system powerful.
2. I will not be made to be less than because I choose to be myself.

3. I will not judge brilliance by how I think it looks or sounds.
4. I will be equally as ratchet as academic.

At face value, the term “ratchetdemic” is abrasive and seemingly anti-academic. But it is not a word meant for teachers. It is not a word meant for armchair philosophers or pedagogues. It is a word meant for the neoindigenous to help them relate to the academic environment. The four tenets of ratchetdemia are meant to liberate and encourage neoindigenous children in the pursuit of wisdom to take creative control of their potential. Some would balk and call this the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (Riley, 2017). Such critics liken ratchetdemics to the movement to teach Ebonics. However, what Emdin talks about in his books, website, and Ted talks is more than just code switching and “talking on the kids’ level”. In a TEDx Talk he likens it to “rainbows over projects”—his childhood notion that rainbows got their colors and brilliance from the places over which they hovered (picturesque mountains and fields) and therefore could not exist in the projects. He says, “Rainbows don’t care where you are or where you come from...A rainbow just needs the perfect conditions for its brilliance to be expressed. It cares not where it happens.” From Science Genius rap battles to Pulitzer Prize winner Kendrick Lamar listening to the poetry of students at Bethel High School, urban children are being seen, heard, and developing critical voices that examine the realities around them and perpetuate their own culture utilizing the rules, music, and entertainment that permeate their lives. Fortuitously discovering Emdin’s work, first as a book suggestion on NPR, and again as a suggested video on TED.com, I sought to begin the work in examining and shifting my personal paradigm in order to apply his pedagogical concepts in my own music classroom.

CHAPTER III

Findings and Discussion

Ensemble as Cogen

In the spring of 2017, several of my students took it upon themselves to arrange and rehearse pop songs that were then performed for school assemblies. Elementary aged students loved to see their older siblings, family members, or neighbors performing songs they listened to on the radio, YouTube, or any one of many music streaming providers. Peers of band students liked to see their friends on a pedestal, performing with unapologetic swag. A small group's original performance of "Heathens" by Twenty One Pilots was the topic of discussion by students and staff for weeks after it was performed. It was a last-minute selection. A small contingency of kids approached my desk one afternoon asking if they could perform for the school-wide assembly taking place in three days. This just so happened to be at the busiest point in the year for a music teacher -- preparing for the end of the year concert. However, I was curious because of the obvious energy with which they approached me. I couldn't in good conscience tell them 'no'. So, I told them that learning and rehearsing the song was entirely their responsibility. I would trust them to come to the music room during a break in their day or after school to practice, but the learning was entirely theirs. In less than twelve hours they had learned, rehearsed, and exhibited their arrangement to me. I gave them the green-light to perform and, bursting with pride, watched as my students took up their instruments and presented themselves to their school. I wanted to preserve and continue this experience.

So, at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year Honors Band was born. I made laminated, individualized, "Band Passes" that would give members permission to attend band rehearsal at the end of the day on Tuesdays throughout the entire year. This new ensemble is not

unlike Emdin's concept of a cogen, just on a larger scale. Cogens function as specialized groups, comprised of students who may vastly differ from each other, who determine the strengths and weaknesses within a learning environment. They find and suggest possible solutions to problems and create their own system of accountability and responsibility in conjunction with the teacher as facilitator. Emdin suggests having four students within a cogen on a rotating basis, allowing everyone in a single class the opportunity to participate within the cogen. Honors Band functioned in very much the same way with "band meetings" that discussed when we should perform, what songs were to be selected, social issues that may arise (and they did), and how to handle disagreements between peers.

Students in Honors Band were selected based on the level of personal interest and responsibility I observed in the previous year. I approached them about their interest in being a part of Honors Band and was pleased to have a solid roster of fifteen students. They were told that they would act as musical ambassadors for the school and be given opportunities to not only perform for assemblies but community events as well. As a carry-over from the "Heathens" performance the year before, along with some children who had been a part of that performance, they aptly named themselves "Trap-ed in the City". Trap-ed caught the attention of my supervisor during a routine observation and, to our great surprise, she conveyed their level of talent and maturity to Achieve Hartford! – an organization that seeks to improve the quality of Hartford schools by actively researching and collecting data on the health and wellness of school programs, reporting their findings, and maintaining accountability. The organization's annual benefit night was to take place in March 2018 where they would highlight some of the best and brightest that Hartford schools had to offer. After a short presentation to the executive director of Achieve Hartford! at the invitation of my supervisor, the band was asked to perform as their "Arts"

ambassadors at the benefit. Needless to say, the kids felt as though they were the most important people on the planet. They had worked hard and earned their V.I.P. status because they were playing at a fancy benefit in a fancy hotel in downtown Hartford. Trap-ed didn't disappoint. Their musical performance was impressive, endearing, and ... fun. People smiled and swayed (some downright danced) as the kids played their hearts out. But the most altering moment occurred well before they even played the first downbeat. Before the benefit began, we were served dinner in a tiny, windowless dining room with white tablecloths and plenty of confusing cutlery. It was a total departure from field-trip cold lunches (or if we were lucky -- pizza) and our small, school cafeteria. As we ate, several students began to randomly raise their glasses in a toast, at first as a joke which eventually evolved into heartfelt thanks. Finally, one student stood up and raised his glass to me and in total gratitude said:

I'd like to make a toast. Ever since Honors Band, ya' know, it really changed my life. Every depression, every sad day, I would get on the piano and play my heart out. Ya' know I would cry -- tears all over my keyboard (laughter). But it's still good, man. A lot more happy and I'd like to thank Ms. Bowers 'cuz without her we wouldn't be here right now. CHEERS TO HONORS BAND! (Bowers, fieldnotes, 2018)

What moved him to do this? Why then and why in front of his peers? He could have easily given a casual "thanks, Miss". I was curious about this outpouring of emotion and, almost a year later, asked him why he decided to give that toast. He said, "I just realized that it was our last few moments to gather. I was sitting and thinking about all the stuff that we did and I just wanted to put a good thought in everyone's head before all of us just started to fade away." He went on to explain that the impermanence of the group dynamic and how it would change once he and his band mates moved on to different high schools. However, he continued to exhibit a competitive, and cohesive, spirit in regards to the newly formed Honors Band. While he acknowledged his Honors Band cohort was in a sense "dead", his opinion was the "new generation isn't living up to

our name”. What made him say that? “Because they’re not better than us.” A Battle of the Bands between OG’s and N00bs was suggested, but he raised the issue of individual friendships throughout the band having broken down over the summer. I asked, “Are you a little sad you’re not friends with some of Honors Band anymore?” “HA! And no. Friends come and go. Easily replaced in one second.” Should I have been shocked at the pessimism of a teenage boy? “That’s a bit depressing.” True to his character he off-handedly explained, “Eh, when am I not depressed?” Earlier in the year, this same student had considered quitting at one point. He explained that he struggled finding a purpose because another band member was more advanced in terms of skill. This was only brought to my attention because two of my girls advocated for him and didn’t want him to quit. I knew the three of them had been working on a song together in their free time, so I made a deal with him. If he went home and worked on their song that night, then came back and showed me what he had the next day, I would feature him in the next assembly. And he did it. He knew and played the entire song the next day and I built the band around him and the girls for that performance. When he was given the High Achievement Award in Music at graduation he was shocked. His bandmates congratulated him and a few individually told me he deserved it the most, especially knowing how he had personally struggled.

School Family

What ultimately made Honors Band so successful was the meeting of needs. The experience afforded the group safety, friendships (and, yes, some relationships too -- the drama of which lead to them voting out the first drummer), feelings of accomplishment, self-actualization, and helping others to self-actualize. One student in the summer program said it best in one of their Survey Monkey responses:

Well it helps me to learn that I might be different on the outside, but I'm more than what I think I am in the inside. And I can express myself when I'm doing what I love most – playing the violin. And it's taught me not to listen to the bad, such as bullies, but to always use my super power of always being positive in the good.

The impact of this cogenerative, musical experience was further crystallized when one of my alumni asked if she could e-mail me her first high school English essay. Of course, I said yes and was touched to read that her essay was about Honors Band. In a beautifully unguarded way she wrote:

My middle school year I was in a band called Trap In The City... My band was cool it was fun, funny, we had [our] up's and down but we were still together. My middle school family we had split apart because high school came but it's okay we still talk [our] band is still together as a family.

This particular student struggled all throughout her time at Milner with literacy. Many times she would come to my room to work on her ELA projects if for nothing else but to reduce anxiety. However, Honors Band gave her something to write about with confidence.

Before the 2018-2019 school year began, and based on my experiences in the previous year, I knew if the summer program was to be successful I would need to enlist the help of my Honors Band students. At Milner, middle school and incumbent high school students are invited to participate in the Summer Survivor program. This program also gives high school students the opportunity to be paid as Milner "Leads" students, where they develop leadership skills and act as role models to younger students. After some organizational confusion and last-minute enrollments, five Honors Band alumni students signed-up to participate in my "Summer Jam" class with five underclassmen in grades 5-8 choosing it as their Summer Survivor elective.

Day one started in chaos which put me off and made me a little insecure, even though I *know* these kids. I didn't have a roster and wasn't even certain who I was supposed to have. Some kids were present in the building, but for one reason or another, weren't able to attend their

elective. I administered the written pre-survey to the students I did have. I neglected to take into consideration their general animosity towards writing down anything. With a generation so attached to their personal technology I realized any data collection, outside of cogenerative dialogue, needed to be easily accessed by phone or some classroom iPads I have.

I told them we had three gig opportunities to consider our overall goal: dates for National Night Out, End of Summer Showcase, and Convocation at Dunkin Donuts Stadium. That gave us three, 2.5 hour rehearsals before our first performance for National Night Out on August 7th. Their eyes widened a bit and, admittedly, I was a little nervous myself. In the interest of time, I had already been thinking about possible repertoire. So, I showed them two ideas for songs I had, just to put something on the table, “Hey Look Ma, I Made It” and “High Hopes” by Panic! at the Disco. I had happened upon these songs by chance while listening to a YouTube playlist and I thought both had messages the students could get behind. There were positive responses and one student suggested one more song by Wale called “LoveHate Thing”, which is a song I knew of and really liked as well. I expressed concerns that it didn’t feature the most broad instrumentation and the rap was pretty challenging, with little opportunity for the vocalists in the band to get their time to shine. The students agreed and so I asked if there were any other suggestions or if they wanted to vote on what they had heard. Ultimately, they said they trusted me to make the choice and would like whatever song I selected. I decided we would dig into “High Hopes”.

“High Hopes” begins with an unmistakable anthem vibe. Trumpet, saxophone, trombone, and a snare drum kick-off the song followed by the driving chorus lyrics:

Had to have high, high hopes for a livin’
 Shooting for the stars when I couldn’t make a killin’
 Didn’t have a dime, but I always had a vision
 Had to have high, high hopes

I admit, when I first heard this song, I thought of it as the underdog anthem. Then, of course, I thought of my students. Not because I believe they are less-than their peerage from more affluent districts, but because sometimes it seems as though they are discounted by the adults around them. Then I realized that the song resonated for me personally. Music was always a way for me to find “my people” when I was in school. Outside of music I felt like the “weird kid”. So, I always kept my social circles securely small much in the same way my students protect themselves from new teachers, students, or administration. They can be untrusting, overly cautious, or downright resistant to new people within our school. And I get it. My middle schoolers, to me, are some of my kindred spirits. Upon reflection, my choice of song wasn’t just because the lyrics have an uplifting message. It was my way of telling my students they have permission to dream and “burn [their] biographies”. So often, I see my perpetual 14-year old self in them.

Don’t, however, mistake this for a vicarious exercise. This work does not survive in toxic, self-serving environments. As my kids said, they trusted me to make a song choice for them. Did they trust my judgment because they thought I had good taste in music? Did they trust I would select a piece of music that would voice their personal beliefs? And if they trusted me to speak for them, is it because we had, in our journey together, come to understand and know each other implicitly?

Fortunately, for a first day, my choice paid off and we made substantial headway. I asked two of my Milner Leads to go into a separate room and start looking up chords and arrangements for the song so they would be able to teach other students next week. In the meantime, I took the rest of the band and began teaching them the chorus by rote explaining that regardless of what instrument they each decide to learn it’s important to know all aspects of a song, not just our

parts, including melody and lyrics. As we progressed through repetitions of the chorus and I could sense they were becoming more comfortable with lyrics, I encouraged them to use body percussion as we sang the chorus to encourage an organic “feel” of the song and its message. I transferred this over to me accompanying them on keyboard while they sang. Eventually, I looked at one of my senior Honors band students from the previous year and asked if he heard a back beat as we played through the song. He said yes and immediately jumped on the kit, while three other students joined him on the tambourine, cajon, and djembe. The other students continued to gather around the piano while we were accompanied by percussion.

Overall, this was a successful beginning. The students seemed excited and even kept singing/playing the song while we were preparing for dismissal. I stressed the importance of practicing at home and included the fact that I would allow students to sign out their instruments after they and their parents signed a liability contract. Unfortunately, some of my younger students failed to consistently return to rehearsals for reasons outside their control. However, other former Honors Band students, hearing that I was running a summer program, asked if they could participate even if they didn’t directly sign-up for the program. They just wanted to play music. With their parents’ permission, I agreed to let them join us. Two of these students were still away on vacation, one of whom begged his father to come back early so he could play with the band. The other student learned his part in two days after I dropped off his instrument to his house. I was touched by their dedication and their quick willingness to be with “the band”. Yet, I was curious, were they dedicated to the band, to me as their teacher, or both? What were the relationships that compelled them to be intrinsically motivated?

The time came for the band to perform for the Hartford Public Schools convocation in front of 2,000 parents, teachers, administrators, and the Superintendent. I was immensely proud

to the point of tears. Our school family made sure to sit in the stadium seats right in front of the stage and cheered the kids on as they left their hearts out there on the Dunkin Donuts Park baseball field. I still have a pre-performance picture of them standing on the balcony overlooking the crowd that's awaiting them. The sun is coming up over the stadium behind them and there is a look of pride, satisfaction, and anticipation on their faces. It's one of my favorite pictures – to see their smiling faces is a daily reminder of my purpose and the potential of all children.

At the end of the summer program, I realized that much of my work would not have been successful if I had not invested the past seven years with my students as their general music teacher. Any musician knows that accomplishing goals within an ensemble requires accountability and a tremendous amount of trust. Bandmates need to be able to trust that the tasks and responsibilities set to each person will be accomplished to the best of their individual and collective abilities. As a band, they need to trust in the strengths of their peers to assist them where they consider themselves weak in their own personal practice. However, as students they are still learning the work that is required in maintaining personal responsibility. My role as their teacher was to define the attitudes and actions that accompany responsibility and to protect the culture of the band.

CHAPTER IV

Significance and Future Work

So What?

The use of Emdin's cogenerative dialogues and engaging in cosmopolitanism allowed me to cultivate a learning environment that was fluid, mutually respectful, creative, and trusting. Through the active use of reality pedagogy I was able to develop "deep connections among students across differences such as race, ethnicity, gender, and academic ability as they work to ensure that they move collectively toward being socially, emotionally, and physically present and committed to the classroom they share." (Emdin, 2016)

In this case, the classroom was the band and they all proved to be deeply committed to each other and the purpose of the band. That purpose was so beautifully illustrated in a student's post-summer program survey response:

Well it helps me to learn that I might be different on the outside, but I'm more than what I think I am in the inside. And I can express myself when I'm doing what I love most – playing the violin. And it's taught me not to listen to the bad, such as bullies, but to always use my super power of always being positive in the good.

What does this mean for American music education moving forward? It must change. And it already is. Organizations like the Rock and Roll Forever Foundation and Little Kids Rock are making their way through public schools around the world to engage children in *music as a second language*. Supported by professional musicians like Steven Van Zandt and Victor Wooten, modern band programs are entering schools and joining traditional music ensembles. Thousands of music teachers share their collaborative music concerts between orchestra, choir, modern band, jazz band, mariachi, Afro-Cuban, and other innumerable examples of the communal power of music in schools.

I have heard, supported, and understand the arguments surrounding the preservation of traditional music programs. Choral music has been a large part of my own musical life, and I wish for a similar positive experience be available to my students. Op-eds, blogs, and memes about the sorry state of music literacy in American education circulate the internet with regularity. Unfortunately, the people who click “Share” fail to realize my students and their families would never see these tidbits. They run on a whole different algorithm. My goals for my students are not the goals for “ya’ll’s” students. And they can’t be.

Some students who go to schools with richly funded, traditional music programs typically go home to some sort of psychological and emotional buffer. Their school/music life is an extension of what they have at home. Disproportionately my students exist without that kind of safety net. A colleague of mine profoundly said, “Sometimes their health is all they’ve got”. I’ll tell you even that is questionable in many cases. So, they come to me and I am their chance at reprieve -- as music often is for all of us.

Now What?

If I care about my students at all, and I do, I can’t fathom forcing them to learn music where they cannot find themselves. I promise popular music isn’t the end-all-be-all of what they will come to learn with me, but it is a door to which they already have the key. One day, you might find yourself comfortably surrounded by the din of drum kits, electric guitar, vocalists, and keyboards banging away at the most recent hit off the Billboard 100 and then suddenly, in the middle of it all, you’ll hear Clair de Lune. And not because it’s the piece that’s been selected for an assessment of piano skills, but because you unlocked a kid’s heart and opened it to beauty, so, when it randomly came up in a YouTube playlist, that kid wanted to learn it with every fiber of

their being. This work is far too imperative to stop the buck at literacy when the passion that was ignited in our bellies by our favorite musical experiences was the reason we first decided to teach music.

Emdin's pedagogical approach to urban education as applied in my music classroom allowed me to forge deep and lasting relationships with my students. These relationships have given them confidence as they continue their academic and personal journey to high school and beyond. In my classroom they learned to lead together, to advocate for each other, to hold themselves and each other accountable, and to take pride in all that they create and re-create. This process created space for their natural evolution and maturation as opposed to enforced character development. It is with this in mind that we must continuously examine our pedagogical practices in the music classroom. If, as Plato says, music education is a matter of "soul", then we must ensure that the children who come to us are allowed to thrive and experience liberation through music making rather than the historical and systematic disassembly of their identities.

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